

Burlington Free Press

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Raise gas tax? Find another way

February 25, 2006

Once in a while, a real head-shaker comes floating out of the Statehouse in Montpelier and lands on the doorstep of average Vermonters who are left wondering if their lawmakers live in a parallel universe.

Thursday, the House Transportation Committee approved a proposal to increase gas and diesel taxes by 6 cents a gallon to 31 cents. Six cents?

People are shopping around for a penny difference in the price of gas. They are already struggling to fill their tanks to get to work. In a rural state with limited public transportation, people can't just hop on a bus or commuter train.

Would a Legislature that has been screaming about price gouging by oil companies turn around and gouge Vermont consumers with a whopping gas tax increase?

Friday, members of the committee voted in favor of a large transportation project bill, of which the gas tax proposal was a part. Only Rep. John Winters, R-Swanton, voted against the bill. Some representatives, anticipating a thumbs-down from their constituents, voted to move the bill along, but stated they wanted to reserve the right to change their vote once they hear from people on Town Meeting Day.

They are likely to get an earful. And they should.

Perhaps what we really need is a state law that says legislators can't gouge taxpayers every time they need some money.

There's no question Vermont's roads badly need repairs. Federal money secured by Sen. Jim Jeffords for roads, bridges and trains is tantalizingly close -- about \$66 million a year for the next five years. But Vermont has to come up with its own share, and a shortfall in the Agency of Transportation means the state needs to find an estimated \$24 million.

The proposed options -- higher taxes, raiding the Education Fund -- have been unpalatable. Lawmakers need to keep working on it and review the list of federally approved projects to ensure Vermonters really want them all.

Legislators also need to take a reality check and think about what a 6-cent tax increase on a gallon of gas or diesel would mean to a Vermont family. The lawmakers who voted in favor of it -- and Democratic House Speaker Gaye Symington, who defended it -- need to hear from their constituents.

Let's bury the gas tax idea before it goes any further. Contact your legislators through the Sergeant at Arms Office in Montpelier: 828-2228.

How they voted

Thursday, the following members of the House Transportation Committee voted in favor of a 6-cent gas tax increase for a gallon of gas or diesel:

Rep. Richard Westman (R-Cambridge), chairman

Rep. Steven Howard (D-Rutland), vice chairman

Rep. Albert (Sonny) Audette (D-South Burlington)

Rep. William Aswad (D-Burlington)

Rep. Tim Corcoran (D-Bennington)

Rep. Sue Minter (D-Waterbury Center)

Rep. David Sharpe (D-Bristol)

OPPOSED

Rep. John Winters (R-Swanton)

Rep. Patrick Brennan (R-Colchester)

Rep. Janice Peaslee (R-Guildhall)

Rep. Andrew Donaghy (R-Poultney)

Friday, all members except Rep. John Winters voted in favor of a large transportation projects bill that includes the 6-cent-per-gallon gas tax increase.